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ABSTRACT

One way that success in integrating literature into middle school classrooms has been achieved is by the systematic study of different genres of literature. Through a variety of activities, students can be engaged in comparisons, contrasts, and other higher-level thinking skills. Response journals, in which students react to their reading by writing, provide another avenue to promote reflection about the literature being read. To develop student interest in reading literature, teachers might try the following techniques: (1) suggest books that match student interest; (2) read literature aloud to the students; (3) give students time to read in class; and (4) make a great number of books available to students. (RS)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON READING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Integrating Literature into Middle School Reading Classrooms

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With an increasing emphasis on teaching literature in reading classrooms, more teachers are looking for supplements to basal readers. Some middle school teachers are trying to integrate literature into their classrooms by teaching from literature anthologies and by using commercial novel units. Although these methods do meet the goal of using literature, there is a need for other innovative ways to involve middle school students in good literature.

Using specific genres

Restrepo (1988) developed a literature program for seventh graders in a middle class neighborhood in Florida where reading scores were below district and national norms. In addition to increasing test scores, Restrepo's goals were to develop an integrated program using a variety of books and to help the students develop an appreciation for literature and independence in reading. Restrepo's belief was that students should study one genre of literature at a time to widen their interests. She noted that books should not be considered in isolation but as part of a larger section in literature. By studying different genres, the students in her program were able to compare books within and across genres. Four of the genres used in this program were biography, realistic fiction, poetry, and tragedy.

Bosma (1981) developed the idea of using genre in literature by designing a unit on folktales. She noted that folktales are a good unit of study for middle school students because: they are predictable; they include stock characters; and they are loaded with adventure, humor, and rich language.

To begin her unit, Bosma picked 120 folktales with an annotated bibliography to be used in each of two sixth-grade classes. She read a folktale to the students; then the students read one independently. She asked the students to do a variety of activities: classify the types of folktales; recognize their theme; and evaluate the use of language in them. By the end of ten weeks, 90% of the students were able to classify the folktales by type: fairy tales, animal tales, legend, and myth. In addition, she reported high levels of student interest. Folktales clearly served to involve students in literature study.

When Anderson (1985) asked sixth-grade students of all reading levels to list the types of books they choose for free reading, the lists were similar across reading levels. The students chose adventure, mystery, tall tales, fantasy, and realistic fiction. Bosma's unit plan on folktales could be extended to these types of books.

Integrating drama

One of the genres of literature that many middle school teachers have not included in their programs is drama. Karabas and Leinwein (1985) suggest that drama be integrated into middle school education. Through drama, students can discover what is meant by being human. Drama also spurs imagination, insight, reflection, and self-knowledge. Karabas and Leinwein's objective in writing a unit on drama was to have students develop the pleasure and

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skills in reading and interpreting drama, to acquaint students with the dramatic tradition so they could critically evaluate current theater, and to increase the students' insights in themselves.

The unit in the curriculum includes sample lessons for a unit on *A Raisin in the Sun*. During the unit, students are asked to present a critique of the drama and to compare their reviews with those of reviewers of other dramatic performances. They discuss the differences between a play, a novel, and a short story. Students are also asked to analyze the particular problems the playwright might have encountered. Although the curriculum is based on a single play, the lessons the authors included would be an excellent basis for a teacher interested in preparing a unit on drama.

Middle school is a time of growth for students; they are commonly called individuals between childhood and adulthood. Although middle school students are usually encouraged to "grow up," Zancanella (1987) uses poetry with his seventh graders to get them to reflect upon their childhood. Zancanella believes that middle schoolers are as nostalgic about their younger years as adults are. He suggests using Ann Sexton's poem, "Fury of Overshoes," to motivate his students to read and write about their childhood as they are trying to meaningfully connect their pasts to the present.

Responding to literature

Teachers who ask their students to read literature independently or listen to them read may benefit from the ideas of Halpern (1986) and the Alberta Department of Education (1987). Halpern (1986) suggests that instead of the typical lesson where students read and teachers ask questions, students write about the books they have read in a response journal. She suggests that students would learn more about literature if they personally respond to the books in writing. Some of the topics Halpern encourages students to write about include whether the students were attracted or repelled by the main character, an incident that made the student angry or happy, something the student did not understand, and a prediction of what could possibly happen next.

The Alberta Department of Education (1987) recommends a similar idea for teachers who read books to their classes. They suggest that students be directed to write in a listening log. The teacher need only stop at a pre-arranged point in the story and the students then write their responses to any number of questions. Among the questions students could respond to are: what they are thinking of, if they have had a similar experience, what they are picturing in their heads, what feelings they have about the characters, and what questions they have about the story.

Success in integrating literature into middle school reading classrooms has been achieved by the systematic study of different genres of literature (e.g., folktales, drama, poetry). Through a variety of activities, students can be engaged in comparisons, contrasts, and other higher-level thinking skills. Response journals in which students react to their reading by writing, provide another avenue to promote reflection about the literature being read. Such journals have the potential to actively involve students in linking their ideas to those posed by the author, teacher, or other students.

On a more general level, to develop student interest in reading literature, teachers might try the following techniques: suggest books that match student interest; read literature aloud to their classes; give students time to read in class; and make a great number of books available to students.

Recently, there appears to be heightened interest in undertaking research on reading and language arts in the middle school. For example, the May 1989 issue of the *Journal of Reading* carries two articles about reading in middle schools, while the January 1990 issue of the same journal features "Helping Middle School Students Develop Language Facility" (Lane Roy Gauthier). The January 1990 *English Journal* focuses on strategies and techniques for English instruction in middle schools and junior high schools.

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